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Reimagining Tradition in Indian Art:The Intersection of Cultural Heritage and Modern Trends

Divishtha Rathore [a]*

[a] *Research Scholar, Department of Visual Arts, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur*
[a]*Email: divishtharathore05@gmail.com*

Abstract

Indian consist a cultural heritage in art which dates back to thousands of years. It stands at a crucial crossroad where tradition meets modernity and they both have actively grown together. This paper investigates on how tradition in Indian art functions not as an unchanged fragment of the past, but as a living and adaptive process which interprets and responds to shifting social realities. Artists think over inherited values and aesthetic modes even if they have to negotiate with the rapidly changing time which includes India's cultural, political, and technological landscapes. Rather than just existing as a stagnant framework, tradition in Indian art encompasses an everlasting and ever adaptive framework of cultural beliefs, values and various practices which are handed down across generations.

The development of Indian art is not an easy transition from tradition to modernity, but it has gone through a complex change where old traditions are debated upon, questioned, judged and finally reinterpreted under the ever changing social, political and aesthetic demands of the time. Paintings made on historical episodes, artworks made under the colonial rule and the lifelong artistic journeys of eminent artists such as Raja Ravi Varma and Abnindranath Tagore, this research paper focuses on how Indian artists have paved a path between continuous cultural changes and the creative innovations made by these great personalities.

The post independence art of India display the cultural heritage, colonial influence, involvement of crafts in art and the struggle for the formation of individual identity. All these important elements have played important roles in distinctively shaping the Indian modern art.The present negotiation between tradition and the change demonstrates that the spirit in Indian art is derived not from unmindful preservation, but from tradition's capacity of self renewal and creative reinterpretation.

Keywords: Tradition , Modernity, Colonial influence , Cultural Heritage, Reinterpretation.

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* Corresponding author.

Introduction

Tradition consist an interconnected system of beliefs, practices, and values that define a particular society. In the context of India, tradition is not a fixed deposit of the past, but it is an ever evolving social inheritance subjected towards reinterpretation and adaptation of new environments and new challenges arising. It is impossible to separate tradition from modernity, as what we consider modern today will be a tradition tomorrow.Every generation meets tradition like water, as water moulds according to the circumstances, sometimes it flows with time just like a river, and sometimes carves a new path for the thoughts of upcoming generations. And this process enables us to preserve our culture while coping up along with the continuous social and historical changes. Tradition is not a frozen remnant but instead it is a continuous flow, which is shaped by an ongoing conversation between the old ways and the rapid changing social, political and technological demands. It is this capacity for rethinking, reinterpreting, renewal, and even rejection that bring differences between living traditions from those that lifeless and become obsolete. Indian art is rooted within one of the world's greatest ancient civilizations, spanning over four thousand years. It embodies a variety of aesthetic languages and philosophical developments that respond variably to context and perception. Through this paper I want to bring a study on how Indian artists

have created the balance between tradition and modernity, by tracing their efforts to reunite their roots and cultural inheritance with new modern trends emerging from the ongoing globalization, nationalism, and technological revolutions.

The Value and Meaning of Tradition:

The foundation of Indian art is interconnected with the idea of a living tradition, i.e., a process of reinterpretation and progression which is sustained over thousands of years. Artist's visual perception, the unconventional materials used, the new techniques and the concept based vocabularies have been handed over, transformed, and repeatedly amended to reflect upon the evolving social, religious, and political realities of the society. Thus we can say that there is little controversy across different cultures about the significance of tradition. The common but often mistaken opposition between 'tradition' and 'change' only emerges with those traditions that have ceased to adapt, resisting the demands of contemporary life and thus risking obsolescence.

In the context of Indian art there is a gap between the tradition and the advent of modernity, with the obvious reason of foreign domination faced during the colonial period. Indian art is not monotonous; it deals with multiple modes of expression which have been shaped by distinct political, cultural, regional, and historical phenomena. For example the contrast between the Buddhist sculptures of Mathura and Gandhara schools. Beyond the individual styles of an artist, the perception of reality, the social surrounding, and the artist's temperament or thought process shape the artistic creations. This multiplicity in art affirms tradition's flexible nature.

Conflict between Colonialism and Modernity:

India suffered immensely under the colonial rule during the eighteenth and nineteenth century and this impacted severely on Indian art and artist. Indian art suffered the lack of patronage along with artisans who got mere wages for their survival, which led towards the change in human behavior, shook the foundation of society. This profound legacy of colonialism in India created a difference between tradition and modernity. According to the colonial ideals, Indian traditions were backward, irrational, superstitious, and regressive, which were required to be abandoned in order for the colonized people to attain civilized sense and modern thought process.

These narratives not only denied the creative adaptability of Indian culture by the artists but also falsely represented the relationship between tradition values and cultural growth. In reality, Indian artistic traditions which were rooted in an ancient civilization for more than four thousand years, has always been open to adapt new techniques, an expansive scenario which has repeatedly incorporated new elements, updated technologies, and diverse ideas from various encounters.

Colonialization has however created an artificial line between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. In the eyes of colonial patrons, administrators and educators, tradition was framed as contradictory to rationality and progressiveness, which was required to be left behind in order to achieve authentic modernity. Under the Colonial rule Indian were forced to copy the west in all walks of life. And this tendency of copying the west blindly has infected the traditional values and has created a misconception that to become modern it is essential to leave the traditions behind. Such reductive oppositions not only neglected the inherent essence of tradition, but also imposed a false narrative of cultural pause on the colonized society.

Nationalism and the search for Identity through the Revival of past:

The end of nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century witnessed drastic political and social changes in our country, which led towards the disturbances created in the growth of art. Thinkers like A.O. Hume and art administrators such as E.B. Havell realized that cultural revival could not be imposed externally but it was necessary to be authored by Indian minds themselves.Intellectuals like Anand Coomaraswamy and Rabindranath Tagore also inspired young artists in identifying the idiom of Indian art. In his book 'Art and Swadeshi' "Coomaraswamy emphasized on greater need of swadeshi in art and religion that swadeshi as a political and economic weapon". By being swadeshi in art it meant to boycott western idioms in art. The establishment of national schools of art, however, was a topic of debate. These schools aimed to develop observations based on nature and life, while they wanted to stop the repetition of traditional forms. Although the west valued India's decorative craft objects but they misunderstood the actual fine art tradition of our country and sidelined it while calling it monstrous. But the advocates of Indian aesthetic principles worked hard and reclaimed, what Indian art actually meant to them. This paper focuses on two of such artists- Raja Ravi Varma and Abnindranatha Tagore.

While Raja Ravi Varma popularized Indian mythological themes and social scenarios through the academic oil painting and new painting techniques, whereas Abnindranath Tagore popularized the authentic Indian art by painting the native models which were apart from western norms. This difference was not only in the painting style but it was the difference between their visions for the roots based in national integrity. Indian art history took a crucial turning point towards the end of nineteenth century which was related with the revival of nationalism and reforming art institutions. While the colonial administrators were focusing on western academic arts, E.B. Havell- the Principal of Calcutta School of Arts, was working hard on bringing back the appreciation for artistic heritage of Indian art. He wanted to bring back our cultural heritage in the education system and this development in Indian art took place with the appointment of Abnindranath Tagore as the Principal in 1905. Under the leadership of this duo, a new style emerged, which can called as a blend of Mughal Miniatutres and Ajanta Paintings. A blend of Ajanta's muted brown tones with the slender figures and graceful poses, which evoked a dreamy atmosphere in contrast to the western realism. The Bengal School of art soon got a wider exposure through exhibiting works, along with the detailed publications in art Journals like 'Rupam' and 'Modern Review'. These exhibitions and publications popularized the works of Abnindranath Tagore and his pupils, including Nandlal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar and others. This gave a rise to a new nationalist art movement in India.

Contrasting Modernisms of Raja Ravi Varma and Abanindranath Tagore

Artists such as Raja Ravi Varma and Abanindranath Tagore have presented divergent strategies by which tradition was reshaped under the pressures of modernism and nationalist aspirations. Ravi Varma's synthesized European academic painting technique with Indian mythological subjects and popularized new forms of representing tradition and made indigenous themes widely accessible to the public through his oleographs. In contrast, Abanindranath Tagore rejected Western academic techniques and cultivated a visual idiom which was rooted in Indian aesthetics and literary imagination. Together, they paved a path for the future generations to experiment with the creative plurality in which the Indian artists have excelled the task of reimagining their tradition within the modern world.

In the early twentieth century, a new distinctive nationalist movement started in Bengal with an ideology of evolving aesthetic discourse in Bengal, closely entwined with the resurgence of Orientalists. This renewed Orientalism provided a clear direction to the nationalist movement which focused on artistic agenda, it was a call for the reinterpretation of India's past and the cultivation of our cultural renaissance. This nationalist art created a unique aesthetic identity that consciously distinguished itself from the prevailing modes of Indian painting sponsored by the British and criticism influenced by Western academic traditions. This was epitomized with the replacement of Raja Ravi Varma's Academic realistic style by Abanindranath Tagore's pioneering Indian style painting, and thus embodied the nationalist desire to reclaim indigenous visual expression through art. Orientalist art played a crucial role in legitimizing this shift towards Indian art by privileging the Bengal School's vision as authentically Indian and made it the centre of the project for cultural reconstruction and the formation of national identity. During the quest of Swadeshi movements, advocates such as Sister Nivedita emphasized on the indispensability of art, alongside science and industry, which were important in the nation's regeneration, by supporting Abanindranath Tagore and his followers.

bharat mata

Although Raja Ravi Varma was widely acknowledged as an important figure in modern Indian art and nation-building, but his warm palette and the depiction of indigenous feminine beauty was targeted by the nationalist critique, which increasingly regarded his style as foreign and thus contrasting sharply with the newly articulated Indian style. While the nationalist aesthetic parameters, famously praised Abanindranath's Tagore's painting *Bharat Mata* (1905) as a symbol of the motherland, they were rejecting other popular motifs which included some of Raja Ravi Varma's works, as foreign and culturally inappropriate for nationalist art. This ideological shift of thought redefined the contours of what was truly considered as nationalist art, this was shaping the trajectory of Indian modernism toward a self-conscious identity and indigenous tradition.

Quest for Identity in a Modern Nation:

By the mid-twentieth century, India's relation with modernism became very complex. Global art exchanges, the emergence of new media in the world, and the rise of individual identity generated a modern consciousness in which the issues of national identity, freedom of expression, and artistic selfhood were closely intertwined. The

engagement with tradition remained central part in Indian art, rather than being abandoned, it inherited forms and motifs which became a resource for experimentation, subversion, and challenging the new articulations of the self and the nation identity.

Post independence, Indian modern art was characterized by diversity and we can say that it was a dialogue between indigenous identity and global modernist art movements. The Progressive Artists' Group, founded in Bombay-1947, broke away from the national caution and the idealism of Bengal School, while experimenting with international styles and remaining deeply rooted in Indian content.

M.F. Husain's art was a blend of classical Indian sculptural style with the contemporary social realities. This often portrayed the amalgamation of urban life and our cultural mythology. S.H. Raza's abstractions such as his famous work 'Bindu' were inspired by Tantra based symbolism, which depicts cosmic order through primary forms. V.S. Gaitonde focused on meditational abstraction and Ram Kumar painted landscapes. While Tyeb Mehta's works expressed existential pain anguish caused by social unrest through his fragmented figures.

Other contemporary artists created a blend of modernist techniques with Indian themes: like Akbar Padamsee painted human struggle with rich textures, Krishen Khanna depicted labor and legacy in thick impastos, and Mohan Samant mingled color planes with works which were deeply personal as well as public.

The post-independence Indian art also witnessed the unfolding of voices beyond male-dominated metropolitan circles which included prominent female artists like N. Pushpamala, Mrinalini Mukherjee, Arpana Caur, Anju Dodiya and others. Artists like J. Swaminathan and K.G. Subramanyan focused on folk and miniature art in order to get an eye on the pluralistic expressions of modernity in India. Ganesh Pyne's hallucinatory figures inspired by the Bengal wash painting reflected upon death and decay. While Sculptor Meera Mukherjee revived tribal lost-wax casting by adding it with a contemporary social commentry.

In southern India, K.C.S. Paniker pioneered a neo-tantric abstraction, which was coalesce of cosmograms, calligraphy, and meditative ground. Artists like G.R. Santosh and Biren De painted the contradiction of translating yogic symbols into modern art, revealing tensions to embrace tradition with contemporary.

Conclusion

Indian art's evolution from its archaic roots to the colonial period, then towards the nationalist revival, and finally the modern experimentation, represents a powerful balance between tradition and modernity. Over the past century Indian art demonstrates that tradition and modernity are not locked in simplistic opposition, in fact they are engaged in a continuous and dynamic integration. By reimagining the forms with new meanings, and the uses of inherited cultural beliefs, Indian artists have persistently renewed their connection to the past while forming innovative paths for the future. This process, which is not based on any fixed canon or doctrine, is what ensures Indian art's ongoing vitality and its rich contributions to the global modernization. It shows that in Indian art tradition not the opposite of change but it is a living continuum which is constituted by the preservation, reinterpretation, and creative transformation of inherited heritage, forms, philosophies, and aesthetic sensibilities. This complex layering of cultural memory over present day demands forms the hinge on which Indian art balances its identity and innovation.

Colonialism introduced narrow paradigms that presented tradition as antithetical to progress and reason, reinforcing knowledge system and hierarchies that supported Western academic models. Yet, Indian artists and intellectuals strategically used alternative ideas by drawing extensively inspired from the resurging Orientalist scholarship, in order to promote the nationalist aesthetic predicated based on individual identity and cultural self-definition. The Bengal School, under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore, solidified this impulse through a poetic and spiritually inflected idiom that deliberately distanced itself from the Western naturalism and realism which was embodied by artists such as Raja Ravi Varma. This reorientation was not just a mere shift in style, rather it embodied a broader project based on the cultural renaissance and aimed at rebuilding nation's identity and create an art tradition which was rooted in indigenous values and historical consciousness. Santiniketan further strengthened this union by embracing an integrated teaching approach which combined craft, environment, and folk traditions with contemporary social themes. This approach aimed to break colonial terms and conditions that created a division between fine arts and local crafts which emphasizing art's deep connection in community and nature.

After independence, modernity in Indian art diversified immensely, driven by the artists who simultaneously created art which was engaged with global avant-garde movements as well as their own cultural inheritance. The Progressive Artists' Group displays great examples of this hybrid engagement, by creating blended artworks which were both, experimental and deeply Indian in content and symbolism at once. At the same time, increasing attention on folk idioms, minority voices, and gender perspectives broadened the canon, by reshaping the definitions of both tradition and modernity. These changes in art affirm that tradition is not something which is to be uncritically or blindly preserved, it is in fact an active site of debate, reinterpretation, and renewal. Indian artists have consistently presented the capacity to critically engage with their heritage, also embracing its symbolic potency while adapting and reformulating its relevance for new socio-political contexts. The Indian modernism is thus characterized by a dialogic relationship between cultural memory and aesthetic innovation, while being rooted in tradition and experimenting with modern views.

To sum up, the trajectory of Indian art reveals a strong cultural system where tradition and modernity coexist and reshape each other. This existing interplay not only ensures the vitality and sustainability of India's artistic heritage but also adds a single nuanced voice to the global contemporary art. Hence we can say that by continuously reimagining itself, Indian art builds a bridge between the past and the present, articulating a cultural modernity that is both simultaneously indigenous or local and global, which is continuously evolving as an everlasting and the very embodiment of a true living tradition.

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